Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

1400 South 19th Avenue
Bozeman MT 59718-5496
June 14, 2016

To whom it may concern:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) is proposing to acquire the Specimen Creek property located adjacent to FWP's Canyon Creek Wildlife Management Area (WMA) northwest of Helena (Appendix A). The property is currently owned by Stimson Lumber Company, and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) intends to purchase the parcels with funding from the Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust, Lewis and Clark County Open Lands Program, the Cinnabar Foundation, and the RMEF. RMEF would subsequently transfer ownership of the parcels to FWP. The first step in the environmental review process is scoping. FWP invites the public to identify any issues and concerns related to this proposal. FWP will then prepare an Environmental Assessment (EA) and invite additional public comment before recommending a final decision to the Fish and Wildlife Commission.

Background and Authority

With the passage of Senate Bill 230 during the 2015 Legislature, FWP is required to conduct public scoping for certain land acquisition projects. The new public scoping language in MCA 87-1-218 reads as follows: For all land acquisitions of 640 acres or more proposed pursuant to 87-1-209, the department shall: (a) conduct a public scoping process to identify issues and concerns as the initial phase of an environmental review pursuant to Title 75, chapter 1, part 2; (b) provide the public with sufficient notice of the proposed acquisition and an opportunity to provide input on reasonable alternatives, mitigation alternatives, mitigation measures, issues, and potential impacts to be addressed in the environmental review; and (c) respond to comments received during the public scoping process as part of the environmental review document. Consistent with that new law, FWP has released this scoping notice, which is also posted on the Department's web site and area news outlets.

FWP has the authority under law (MCA 87-1-201) to protect, enhance and regulate the use of Montana's fish and wildlife resources for public benefit now and in the future. In 1987, the Montana Legislature passed House Bill (HB) 526, which earmarked hunting license revenues to secure wildlife habitat through lease, conservation easement or fee title acquisition (MCA 87-1-241 and 242). This is referred to as the Habitat Montana Program. The maintenance account and other costs/fees associated with acquisition will be provided by FWP with general hunting license and Habitat Montana funds, respectively.

Proposal

Through donation from RMEF, FWP is proposing to acquire a 729-acre property which is comprised of two parcels, one of which adjoins the existing Canyon Creek WMA about 34 miles

northwest of Helena (please refer to Appendix A). The property includes reaches of Specimen, Canyon, and Weino Creeks and would be an addition to the WMA.

Overview of property resources

The benefits of this property not only include increasing the amount of existing, contiguous protected wildlife habitat and further protection of a stream corridor containing native westslope cutthroat trout but also include maintaining public access to public lands in a strategic location and maintaining public use (including angler access and use; at present Stimson Lumber allows public access).

This parcel, like the existing Canyon Creek WMA, provides hunting opportunity for mule deer and elk, winter range for mule deer and moose, and spring, summer and fall range for all three of these big game species. In addition, the entire suite of carnivores, grizzly and black bear, wolves, Canada lynx, wolverine, bobcat, etc., utilize the area, and this parcel falls within an identified high-priority wildlife linkage area along the Continental Divide.

Specimen Creek contains a population of westslope cutthroat trout, but abundance has declined in recent years due to competition and predation pressure by Eastern brook trout. Genetic testing has shown the population is >90% pure westslope cutthroat, so hybridization with non-native rainbow trout is minimal. Weino Creek has historically contained a low level westslope population. Efforts to protect and enhance these populations would likely include installation of fish barriers to impede migration of non-native salmonids and targeted removal of non-native fish. Implementation of these actions would be simplified if the property was in public ownership.

Management Plan

The parcels would be managed as an addition to the existing Canyon Creek WMA under the same management plan.

Opportunities for public involvement

Formal public participation specific to FWP's proposed acceptance of the Specimen Creek Property begins with this scoping process. Public scoping comments will help in the development of a Draft Environmental Assessment (EA), which is planned to be available for public review immediately following this scoping. The Draft EA explains how FWP's management and proposed expenditures for this property plan to conserve the property's fisheries and wildlife values as well as maintain public access to public lands. Availability of the EA will be advertised in the local area, and through statewide media via FWP's website at www.fwp.mt.gov – Public Notices. Additionally, a public hearing will be held in Helena to inform the public about the proposal. After reviewing public input received through the EA, FWP's Region 3 Supervisor will decide upon a preferred alternative. A recommendation will then be provided to the Fish and Wildlife Commission. The Fish and Wildlife Commission will be asked to render a final decision on this proposal at one of their regularly scheduled meetings. The Montana State Board of Land Commissioners will provide ultimate approval/disapproval on the proposal.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is requesting public input and comments (scoping) on the

proposed project from June 14-July 14, 2016. If you have any written comments regarding the proposed project, please mail them to Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks - Helena Area Resource Office, **c/o Canyon Creek WMA Addition – Specimen Creek Proposal**, PO Box 200701, Helena, MT 59620. Or, email comments (preferred) to jsika@mt.gov **Attn: Canyon Creek WMA Addition – Specimen Creek Proposal**.

If you have any questions regarding the proposed project, please call Jenny Sika at (406) 495-3268 (FWP Wildlife Biologist) or e-mail questions to Jenny Sika at jsika@mt.gov.

Thanks for your time and consideration of this proposed land project.

Sincerely,

Sam B. Sheppard
Region 3 Supervisor

Appendix A

Maps of the Specimen Creek Property

Figure 1. Specimen Creek Property and surrounding land ownership, Lewis and Clark County, Montana (2013 imagery).

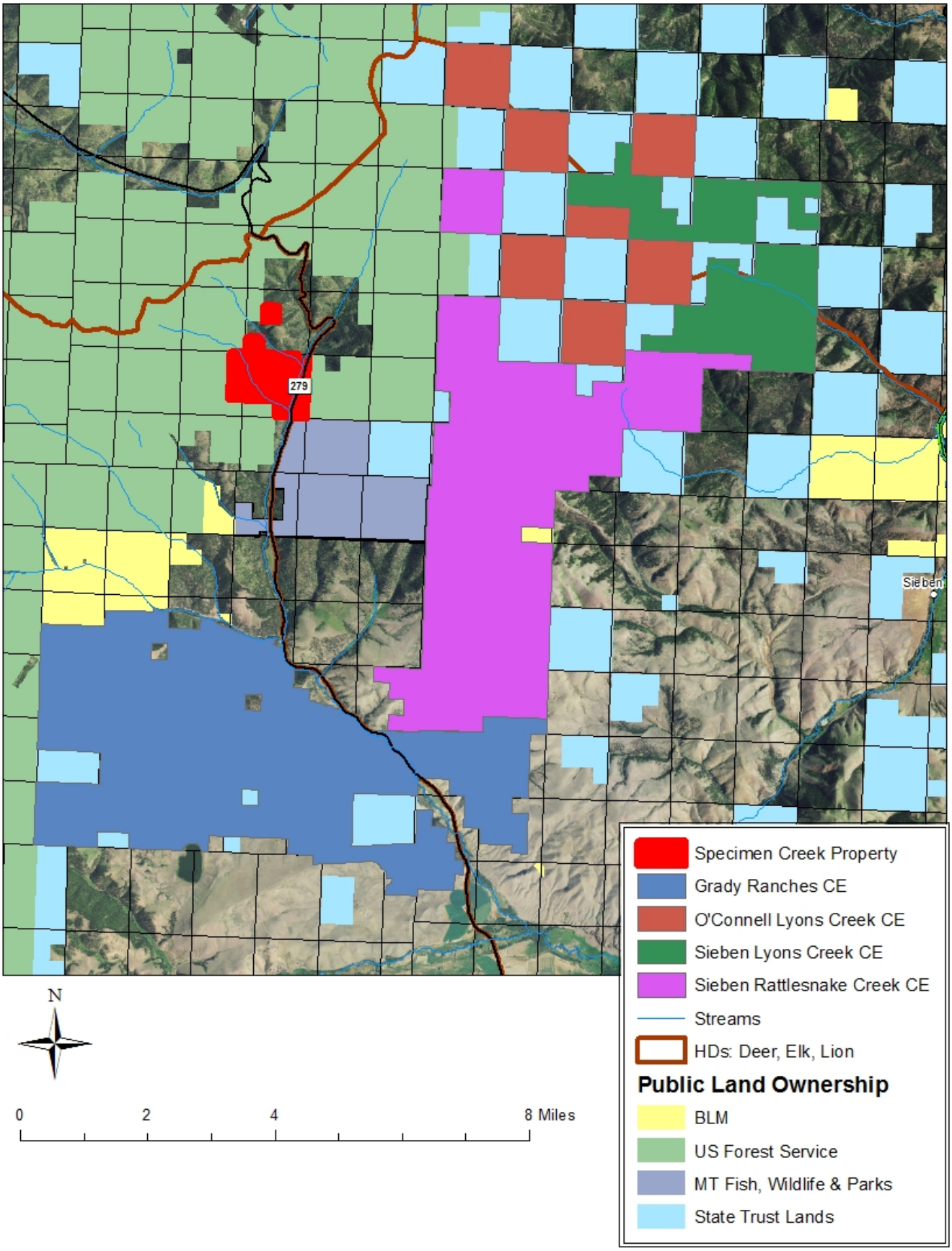
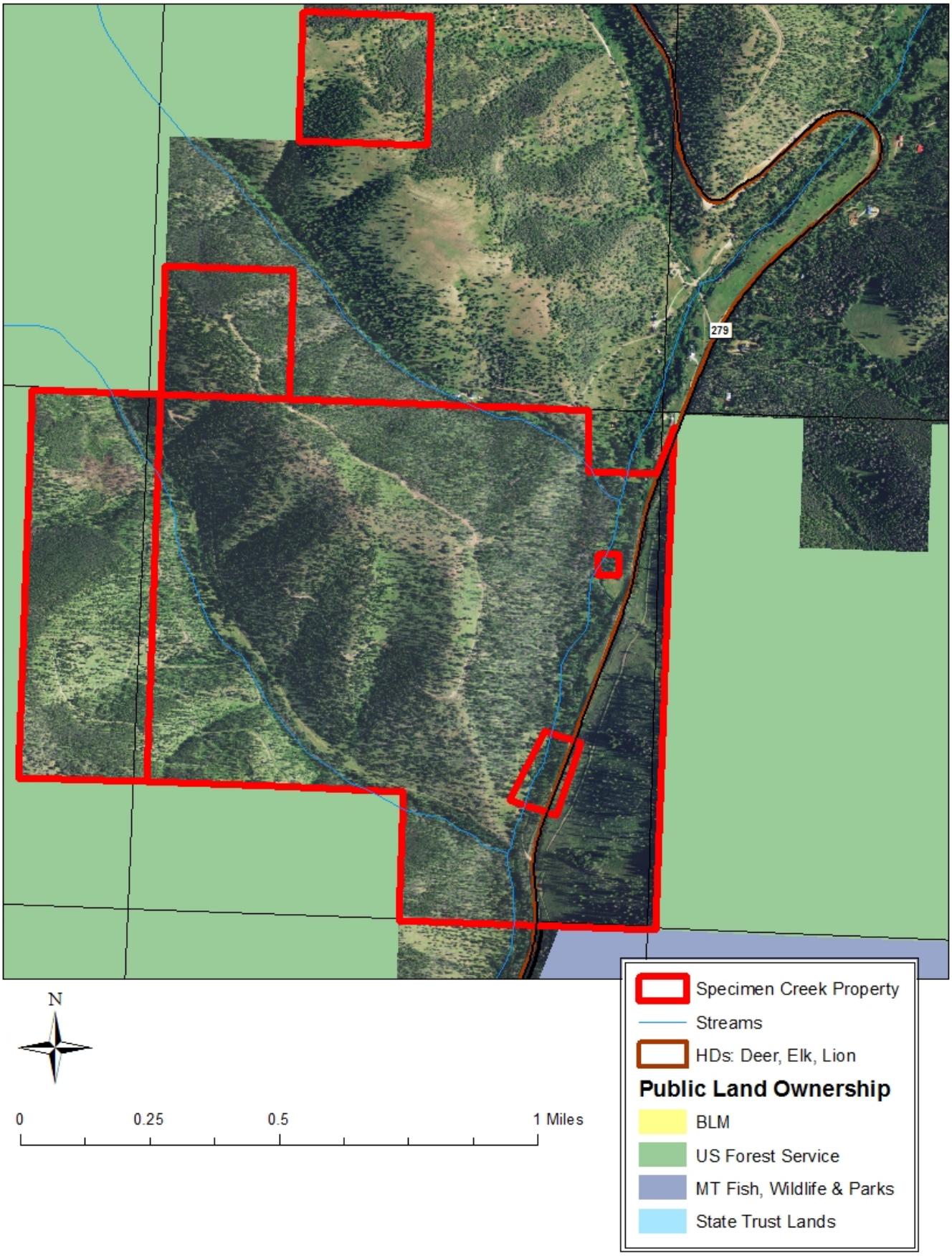
Figure 2. Specimen Creek Property with aerial photo background, Lewis and Clark County, Montana (2013 imagery).